



The Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence, Italy. Photo taken in November 2019.

Claire Litt //

A recipe book composed four hundred years ago sits on a shelf in Florence's Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (1). Its title, "Anon Raccolta di segreti alchimi [...]" (Anonymous Collection of Alchemy Secrets [...]) is similar to numerous other manuscripts in the collection and does not hint at all at all at the book's original use. Flipping through its yellowed pages, however, the scrawled penmanship of our anonymous 16th-century author details recipes and instructions revealing of its provenance. This was not a physician's handbook, but rather someone's compilation of all sorts of useful domestic knowledge ranging from medicines, to personal hygiene, and household tips. It offers instructions for keeping roses alive all year long and a recipe "a fare morire li ratti" (To make rats die) (11r). While the book contains a few serious alchemical endeavours, such as how to melt crystal or make gold from iron, the recipes on the whole are concerned with the maintenance of a household and the people who resided in it. It is the domestic nature of the text that suggests its primary reader was a Florentine housewife who, somewhat exasperated after having just prepared a rat poison out of wild watermelon, reached for it again when someone in the household came down ill.

The home cures the book offers shed light on the types of ailments that have, evidently, irritated humankind throughout the centuries—but not badly enough that they bothered to see a doctor. This was a book to consult for minor annoyances, when you had the “dolore di corpo” (body pains), and to “Contra dolore di orchie” (To counter earaches) (12r). It addresses “dolor di testa” (headaches), and unsurprisingly, contains a remedy “Contra catarro,” to ease the symptoms of the common cold (12r).

Although they were home cures, the recipes still contained potent medical ingredients—the kinds of which can only be found in pharmacies today. The troubles that plagued Macbeth, who protested “Sleep no more! Macbeth doth murder sleep,” wouldn’t have been a match for the remedies offered for insomnia in this recipe book, composed in the same period as the play. Instructions “A far dormire” (To make sleep) read:

“Rx. Semete di dente cavallino, seme di papavero negro e bianco, seme di lattuca seme di lino an oz. / per ciaschuna scorze di radice de faba in verza scorza de mandragola octave dui per una appio octavo i zaffarano el z di uno octavo cinamomo pepe longo octavo uno e farne spetie e darne a quello voi far dormire et una octava fa dormire 4 hore.” (9v)

This recipe calls for “seeds” of pony’s teeth, black and white poppy’s seeds (*papavero*), the seeds of a type of wildgrass (*lattuca*), flax seeds, the peels of *faba* root and mandrake, saffron, cinnamon, and long pepper. It instructs that the measurement of one *octava* will cause someone to sleep for four hours. Clearly, the active ingredient in this recipe is the poppy’s seed, from which derives the modern opioid drugs currently causing a public health crisis across North America.

Historians of medicine often pursue the wonderful bizzarries of early modern medical culture, what might be termed the “historically exotic:” strikingly foreign cures from long ago. It is, however, books such as this one that illuminate the historically transcendental nature of the human corporeal experience. In other words, while nearly every other facet of an early modern person’s life would be unrecognizable today, our understanding of what it is to suffer from insomnia, or a headache—and our sympathy for any attempts to cure it—somehow provide a link to our predecessors and ascertain our shared human experience.

Citations:

(1) “Anon Raccolta di segreti alchimici medicinali, e di colori [...]”, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Firenze, Magliabechiano cl.XVI, cod.121.